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ABSTRACT

This pamphlet offers general rules and specific suggestions for people who are dressing children with cerebral palsy. Common dressing problems are examined, such as the child becoming stiff, crossing the legs, or curling the toes, and possible solutions are outlined step-by-step and accompanied by illustrations. Guidelines are also provided for teaching children to dress and undress independently. The pamphlet concludes with factors to consider when selecting clothing styles and fabrics, and techniques for modifying fasteners such as zippers, buckles, and buttons. (JDD)

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Dressing Techniques

for children who have cerebral palsy

Marsha Dunn Klein, M.Ed., O.T.R.
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Dressing Techniques
for children who have cerebral palsy

Children who have cerebral palsy can be a challenge to the people who are dressing them. The movement difficulties involved in cerebral palsy, hypertonia, hypotonia, and many types of brain damage can make it difficult for a caregiver to dress or teach dressing skills to the child.

Children who are spastic or hypertonic often have tight muscles, and they may resist movement and changes as they are dressed and undressed. Sometimes they stiffen, throw back their head and shoulders, and straighten and cross their legs when they are lying on their back. Their arms may pull tight and bend at the elbow, wrist, and fingers.

Athetoid children, who are in constant motion, present different problems. They have difficulty holding any one position or moving one part of the body long enough to help in dressing or undressing.

Children with hypotonia have weak, "floppy" muscles. It is hard for them to help in the dressing process because of their low muscle tone and joint stability.

Here are a few general rules that may make it easier to dress and undress these children.

1. Teach the child to use movements that are as normal as possible when dressing or undressing.
2. Be sure the child is in the most relaxed, well-balanced position possible.
3. Reduce distractions in the room, so the child can concentrate on the dressing process.
4. Use simple clothing styles.

Some Common Dressing Problems and Possible Solutions

Problem:
When lying on the back, the child becomes stiff, with legs straight and crossed, and head and shoulders back.

Some possible solutions:
The cerebral palsied child becomes stiff because of muscle spasticity and abnormal reflexes. Try these techniques to relax tightness:

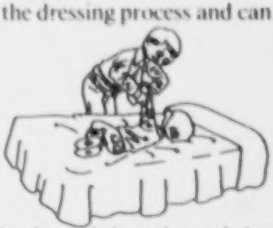
Position the head forward.

Position the head symmetrically at the middle of the child's body.

Bend the hips.

Avoid touching the child's back or back of the head.

These techniques are used in the following four positions. In the first two, the child can watch the dressing process and can help as much as possible.



1. The child lies on one side.
In the sidelying position with hips bent, it is easier to bring the head and shoulders forward to relax the child.

Roll the child from side to side during dressing and undressing. The constant slow rolling motion will reduce the possibility of the child stiffening while lying on the back.

2. The child is seated symmetrically, with support (Symmetrical Supported Sitting).
Hold the child's hips bent, head forward at midline, shoulders and trunk forward.

Seat the child on your lap or on a firm surface.

3. Child lies over your lap.

The child is relaxed because no pressure is made to the back.

The child's head and shoulders are forward and hips are bent (instead of having a pulled-back shoulder and stiff hips).

The child is symmetrical.

Your legs can be slightly apart to keep the child in an easy position for dressing.

4. The child is seated on your lap.

Pull the child's shirt off from the back of the head in a forward direction (rather than forward to back). This helps the child's head to move in a tucked chin direction.

Problem:
One side of the child's body is stiffer than the other.

A possible solution:
Have the child in one of the relaxing positions described above (lying on side, over your lap, or seated symmetrically).

Remember:
The stiffer arm or leg goes **in** the clothing first.

The stiffer arm or leg comes **out** last.

Problem:
It is difficult to get the child's bent arm through a sleeve because it is stiff or because the child has low muscle tone and is not able to help.

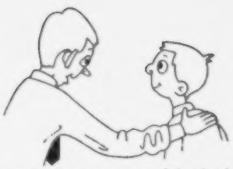
Some possible solutions:
Place the child in a relaxed position with head at midline.

Put the most affected arm in first.

Straighten the child's arm, then **put the sleeve on** or **push the arm through.** Don't try to pull the arm in or grasp the fingers and pull.

If the child's fingers tend to get caught, try putting a mitten over the child's hand.

Problem:
When approached with unexpected noise or movement, the child stiffens.



Some possible solutions:
People who have cerebral palsy often tend to react with their entire body when something unexpected occurs. During dressing, these hints may help:

Be sure the child can see you coming.

Approach the child slowly.

Tell the child what you are about to do.

Be sure the child is in a relaxed position.

Problem:
It is difficult to bend the child's legs to cross them or to put on a shoe.

A possible solution:
Bend the child at the hips by pushing up under the big toe. Cross the child's leg by bending the hip and knee outward.

Problem:
The child's toes curl, making it difficult to get the toes straight in the shoe.

Some possible solutions:
Have the child in a relaxed position, sitting symmetrically, head at midline. Cross the leg that is being dressed.

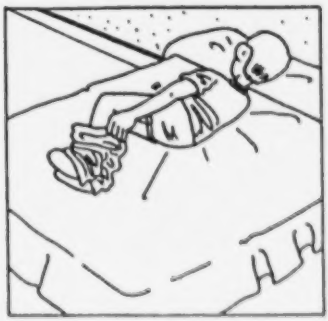
Try using shoes that unlace completely to the toe so the foot can be placed in the shoe.

Use shoes that have cut-out or clear toes, so you can see the toes in the shoe.

Dressing and Undressing Independently

All children need to be able to dress and undress without help. But for children who have cerebral palsy, muscle and coordination problems make the task more difficult. It is important for parents to spend the extra time and patience it takes to teach their children how to get dressed by themselves.

1. To help these children learn to stabilize and relax themselves, teach them to use the techniques given above.



2. If it is hard for the child to balance when sitting, sidelying is a good position.

3. For better balance, teach the child to sit with feet flat on the floor, holding behind with one or two hands. This makes it easier to sit straighter. If more help is needed for balance, teach the child to keep one hand on the bench or stool while using the other hand for dressing.

4. It is easier to relax if the trunk is rotated while sitting.

5. A small wooden box can provide extra balance for the hemiplegic cerebral palsied child.

6. Walls and corners can be used for support.

7. Chairs can be used for support.

8. A bed or chair can be used for support in kneeling.

9. If the toes curl in the shoe, remind the child to cross one leg.

Clothing Tips

Clothing Style and Construction

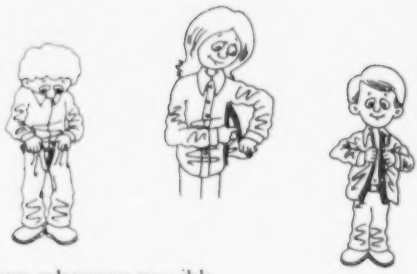
When buying clothing, consider the wearer's range of motion and joint mobility.

1. Select easy-fitting styles. Avoid clothing that fits tightly. Look for fuller clothing, as appropriate.
2. Pay attention to the sleeve style. Raglan or dolman sleeves have large arm openings. Set-in sleeves are harder to get in and out of. Short sleeves may be easier than long sleeves.

3. Look for shirts with easy neck openings (boat necks, V-necks, and horizontal crossover necklines).
4. Front-opening clothing is helpful for individuals who have limited joint mobility.
5. Wraparound clothing may be easier for a motorically involved person.
6. Short jackets, capes, or ponchos are easier for the individual in a wheelchair.
7. Consider whether the garment is made so the fasteners can be easily removed or modified, if necessary.

Fabrics

1. Be sure to have comfortable fabric close to the body. Avoid fabrics that are rough or itchy.
2. Look for fabric that "gives" with movement. Polyester blends tend to resist shrinkage, stretching, and wrinkling while allowing some "give." Jerseys and knits also are easy for dressing and undressing. Acrylic blends are soft, warm, and resist wrinkling. Nylon is one of the strongest materials, but in some cases it should be avoided because of its slippery surface.



Fasteners

Do without fasteners whenever possible.

Velcro strips can replace zippers. The Velcro strips can be hidden behind a mock zipper.

Buttons also can be replaced by Velcro. Replace the button with a single Velcro circle. Sew the buttonhole shut and resew the button over the buttonhole. Attach another circle of Velcro to the back of the button.

Zippers, Snaps, Buckles, and Buttons

When zippers, snaps, buckles, and buttons are used, use a size larger than usual.

A safety pin attached to a zipper may make it easier to grasp.

A magnetic belt buckle makes buckling easier.

Buttons

Buttons are easier to grasp if they are flat (instead of concave), large, textured, or sewn slightly above the surface of the garment.

Be sure buttonholes are large enough to be buttoned easily.

Extend cuff buttons by sewing them loosely, with long shank threads. Or sew them on with elastic thread, so the button can remain buttoned while the sleeve is being slipped on or off.

Cuff-link cuffs can be put together with two buttons and elastic so they will remain fastened while the hand pushes through the cuff.

Clothing Reinforcement

1. Where necessary, double-stitch seams and reinforce areas that receive stress from tight muscles, braces, or excessive movement.
2. Patch clothing at the knees, hips, and under the arms, to reinforce areas that usually wear out first from rubbing against crutches or braces.

Dressing Practice

For dressing practice, generally start with larger outer clothing. Work inward as skills improve.

Oversized clothing is helpful for practice, but it may not be appropriate for everyday use if it draws attention to the person's disability.

Special Considerations for Your Child

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